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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to assess changes in the practice of school psychology over the past 5 years, practicing school psychologists who responded to the National School Psychology Questionnaire (NSPQ) in 1982 were resurveyed. School psychologists (N=322) provided current demographic information and information on their desired and actual activities. Responses from the present administration of the NSPQ were compared to responses from the 1982 administration. The results revealed that time devoted to assessment decreased since 1982 (52% versus 54%) and time devoted to intervention increased (26% versus 23%), while time in consultation (18%) and research (1%) remained constant. Consistent with the 1982 results, a decrease in assessment was desired along with increases in intervention, consultation, and research. In 1987, more time was devoted to nonhandicapped students (20% versus 17%) and less time was spent working with preschool students (5% versus 7%). (Author/NB)

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Changes in School Psychology Practice: A Five Year Update

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Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Atlanta, August 1988.

Running head: CHANGES IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

In order to assess changes in the practice of school psychology over the past five years, practitioners who responded to a 1982 questionnaire on school psychology practice were resurveyed. The responses of 322 practitioners were analyzed. Time devoted to assessment decreased (52% vs 54%) and time devoted to intervention increased (26% vs 23%) while time in consultation (18%) and research (<1%) remained constant. Consistent with the 1982 results, a decrease in assessment was desired along with increases in intervention, consultation and research. More time was devoted to nonhandicapped students (20% vs 17%) and less time with preschool students (5% vs 7%).

In the past few years school psychology has experienced significant growth and change. There are an estimated 20,000 school psychologists today with half of those currently practicing having been trained since 1970 (Fagan, 1986). The nature of the training has shifted from related fields such as counseling and clinical psychology to accredited school psychology programs (Fagan, 1986); more females have entered the field recently than in the past; and the school psychologist to student ratio has decreased from 1:5000 in 1970 to 1:1500 in 1983 (Ramage, 1986). And yet, cross sectional surveys of practicing school psychologists suggest great stability in the roles and functions of practitioners (e.g. Meacham & Peckham, 1978; Smith, 1984).

Meanwhile, considerable attention has been focused on the future of school psychology itself (e.g. Conoley, 1987; Fagan, 1986). Surveys of practitioners at different points in time (e.g. Lacayo, Sherwood & Morris, 1981; Meacham & Peckham, 1978; Ramage, 1984, April; Smith, 1984) have been used to describe current practice and to assess changes in the profession. A missing element, however, has been the assessment of change in the practice of school psychology over time by the same group of individual practitioners. Such longitudinal studies are lacking.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to collect longitudinal data on practicing school psychologists who completed the National School Psychology Questionnaire (NSPQ; Smith, 1984) in 1982. Specifically, the study was designed to collect current demographic information from the respondents, to determine their actual and desired activities, to ascertain the amount of time spent with various categories of students and to compare these responses with the responses provided five years earlier.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 180 males (56%) and 142 females (44%). Mean years of school psychology experience was 13.00 with a range of six years to 33. Educationally, 38 held the Master's degree alone, 157 held the Master's degree plus 30 hours, 68 held the Specialist degree and 58 held a doctoral degree. School Psychology was the field of study for 241 (75%) of the respondents while 26 (8%) indicated Clinical Psychology as their field of study, 10 (3%) indicated Special Education and 45 (14%) indicated "other." Mean school psychologist to student ratio was 1:2288 as compared to 1:2301 in 1982.

Procedure

The NSPQ was sent to 826 school psychologists who completed the questionnaire in 1982 and indicated they were actively engaged in the practice of school psychology. (The original sample was randomly selected on the basis of state department of education listings for 39 states and membership in professional school psychology organizations for 11 states.) Questionnaires were mailed in the spring of 1987 with follow-up questionnaires sent to those practitioners whose questionnaires were not returned within six weeks.

Questionnaires were returned for 491 individuals (return rate of 59%). Of this total 23 had retired, 22 had accepted administrative or supervisory positions within the school system, 9 were engaged in private practice, 5 had left the field of school psychology, 3 had assumed academic positions with colleges or universities, 4 were unemployed, 3 were engaged in further academic study, 3 had died, 80 had left their previous positions and could not be located and 337 were continuing to practice school psychology and completed the questionnaires. A few questionnaires (15) were completed by someone other than the original respondent and were excluded from data analysis. Consequently, data analysis was based on the responses of 322 practitioners.

Results and Discussion

In order to determine if changes had occurred in the respondents' school psychology practice from 1982 to 1987, t-tests for related samples were performed. Significant changes were noted in amount of time devoted to assessment activities ($t = 2.03$, $p < .05$) and intervention activities ($t = 2.64$, $p < .01$) with a decrease in time devoted to assessment (53.9% to 51.5%) and an increase in time devoted to intervention (22.8% to 25.8%). Percentage of time devoted to consultation and research remained the same at 18.8% versus 18.6% for consultation and less than 1% for research. These results are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The respondents also indicated they would like to spend less time in assessment (37.5% ideal versus 51.6% actual; $t = 13.89$, $p < .001$) and more time in intervention (32.2% ideal versus 25.4% actual; $t = 8.09$, $p < .001$), consultation (23.0% ideal versus 18.8% actual; $t = 6.59$, $p < .001$) and research (4.5% ideal versus .8% actual; $t = 8.13$, $p < .001$). Similar results were obtained in 1982. These results are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Additional t-tests for related samples indicated that there were no changes in the amounts of time spent with students at elementary (54%), junior high (21%) and senior high (16%) levels as compared to 1982 results. A decrease in time with preschool students (7.1% in 1987 versus 5.4% in 1982; $t = 2.16$, $p < .03$) was indicated. The respondents indicated increases in the amount of time spent with the regular school population (20.4% in 1987 versus 16.7% in 1982; $t = 2.92$, $p < .01$) and decreases in the amount of time spent with learning disabled students (31.7% in 1987 versus 34.2% in 1982; $t = 2.10$, $p < .05$), mentally retarded students (10.2% in 1987 versus 12.3% in 1982; $t = 2.88$, $p < .01$) and students with sensory impairments (1.7% in 1987 versus 3.4% in 1982; $t = 3.01$, $p < .01$). These results are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Similar to the results in 1982, the respondents indicated that they would like to spend more time with regular education students, gifted and talented students, and students with sensory impairments. Likewise, significant reductions in time spent with LD students, students with behavior problems, students with mental retardation and students with speech disorders. These results are

presented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

A comparison of perceived competency ratings using a seven point scale from 1 (low competency) to 7 (high competency) indicated significant increases in ratings for personality assessment, report writing, observation skills, student counseling skills and inservice activities. The remaining ratings were not significantly different from 1982. These results are presented in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

Satisfaction with the field of school psychology remained stable and positive with a rating of 2.7 versus 2.6 on a seven point scale with one being very satisfied and seven being very dissatisfied. The respondents' views of the future of school psychology (on a similar seven point scale) was more optimistic than in 1982 (3.09 versus 3.29; $t = 2.67$, $p < .01$).

Much stability is indicated by the results of this follow up study of practicing school psychologists. While some changes have occurred in the amount of time allocated to various activities, significant discrepancies continue to exist between actual and ideal practice.

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Table 1
Professional Activities: 1982/1987

		1982		1987		
Kind of activity	n	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	t
Assessment	258	53.9	18.4	51.5	20.1	2.03***
Intellectual	238	25.4	15.8	24.4	15.3	.87
Personality	238	8.6	8.1	7.7	7.2	1.52
Report Writing	237	14.8	9.9	14.5	8.7	.38
Observation before	238	4.4	4.1	4.2	4.4	.52
Observation after	238	1.9	3.2	1.3	2.5	2.89**
Intervention	259	22.8	14.2	25.8	17.2	2.64**
Counseling Students	244	8.3	11.5	9.2	12.7	1.19
Counseling Parents	249	3.6	4.8	5.7	15.4	2.08***
Counseling Teachers	244	2.6	3.5	2.9	4.0	1.07
Child Study Meetings	240	7.8	6.9	7.9	8.1	1.10
Program Development	242	2.1	3.9	1.7	2.9	1.63
Consultation	259	18.6	10.7	18.8	11.3	.31
With Teachers	243	8.3	6.6	7.9	5.9	.83
With Parents	244	5.3	4.6	5.2	5.3	.43
With Administrators	243	4.0	3.5	4.1	3.3	.28
Inservice Activity	242	1.3	1.8	1.6	2.3	1.85
Research	259	.9	2.5	.8	4.1	.56
Developing	243	.4	1.4	.2	.7	2.46***
Conducting	243	.3	.9	.3	1.2	.55

Note. n refers to number of respondents.
* $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .05$

Table 2
Actual and Desired Professional Activities 1987

	Actual			Desired		
Kind of activity	n	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	t
Assessment	238	51.6	19.9	37.5	18.4	13.89*
Intellectual	294	23.7	15.1	15.0	11.0	13.70**
Personality	294	8.3	7.3	7.3	6.5	2.72**
Report Writing	294	14.2	8.9	7.7	6.4	14.47*
Observation before	294	4.3	4.5	5.3	5.1	3.40*
Observation after	294	1.4	2.6	2.5	3.1	5.47*
Intervention	294	25.4	16.6	32.2	17.7	8.09*
Counseling Students	310	9.0	12.0	17.0	22.8	6.83*
Counseling Parents	295	3.6	4.8	6.1	6.6	6.93*
Counseling Teachers	295	2.8	3.6	3.9	4.5	5.09*
Child Study Meetings	295	8.3	8.4	6.0	5.8	5.37*
Program Development	295	1.7	2.9	3.4	4.5	8.23*
Consultation	298	18.8	11.7	23.0	12.9	6.59*
With Teachers	295	7.8	5.8	9.1	6.8	4.10*
With Parents	295	5.1	5.1	6.5	4.7	4.33*
With Administrators	295	4.1	3.5	4.4	3.8	1.84
Inservice Activity	295	1.6	2.5	3.2	3.9	7.82*
Research	298	.8	3.8	4.5	8.7	8.13*
Developing	296	.3	.8	2.2	4.5	7.35*
Conducting	296	.3	1.1	2.2	4.2	8.12*

Note. n refers to number of respondents.
* $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .05$

Table 3
Comparison of Time Spent Serving Students: 1982/1987

		1982		1987		
By Grade Level	n	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	t
Preschool	313	7.1	15.3	5.4	13.3	2.16***
Elementary	313	54.5	30.7	53.5	31.7	.56
Junior High	312	19.1	21.3	21.3	23.2	1.50
Senior High	313	15.1	22.8	16.2	24.1	.86
By Student Category						
Behavioral Problems	293	22.2	19.4	24.2	20.1	1.86
Regular Education	293	16.7	19.3	20.4	21.0	2.92**
Gifted and Talented	294	3.6	7.0	3.4	5.7	.63
Sensory Difficulties	293	3.4	9.1	1.7	4.0	3.01**
Learning Disabilities	293	31.7	20.2	34.2	20.2	2.10***
Mental Retardation	293	12.3	13.0	10.2	11.9	2.88**
Physical Handicaps	294	2.2	4.0	2.1	4.2	.46
Speech Disorders	293	3.1	7.2	2.7	5.8	.82

Note. n refers to number of respondents.
* $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .05$

Table 4
Time Spent with Students: Actual and Desired (1987)

		Actual		Desired		
By Student Category	n	Mean %	SD	Mean %	SD	t
Behavior Problems	282	24.2	21.6	22.4	18.6	2.45***
Regular Education	282	20.2	21.5	28.0	21.4	7.92*
Gifted and Talented	282	3.3	5.7	6.7	8.7	6.92*
Sensory Difficulties	282	1.8	4.3	2.4	5.8	2.63**
Learning Disabilities	282	34.0	20.4	24.2	16.4	10.29*
Mental Retardation	282	10.4	12.1	8.9	10.9	3.57*
Physically Handicaps	282	2.2	4.7	2.4	4.5	.67
Speech Disorders	282	2.8	6.2	2.2	4.3	3.03**

Note. n refers to number of respondents.
* $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .05$

Table 5
Perceived Competency Ratings: 1982/1987

		1982		1987		
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Assessment						
Intellectual	289	6.52	.67	6.56	.76	.88
Personality	259	5.50	1.24	5.71	1.21	3.08**
Report Writing	235	5.99	.90	6.10	.92	1.97***
Observation before	235	5.75	1.13	5.89	1.07	2.01***
Observation after	235	5.63	1.30	5.85	1.13	2.18***
Intervention						
Counseling Students	293	5.44	1.23	6.03	1.59	6.27*
Counseling Parents	229	5.66	1.22	5.62	1.27	.50
Counseling Teachers	203	5.48	1.28	5.46	1.31	.28
Child Study Meeting	224	5.92	1.08	6.04	1.05	1.50
Program Development	177	4.93	1.36	4.92	1.50	.15
Consultation						
With Teachers	263	5.78	1.00	5.84	1.00	.92
With Parents	251	5.93	.96	5.93	1.00	.00
With Administrators	241	5.69	1.13	5.84	1.08	1.95
Inservice Activity	194	5.05	1.37	5.26	1.44	2.21***
Research						
Developing	165	4.12	1.65	4.27	1.78	1.35
Conducting	160	4.11	1.64	4.34	1.69	1.85

Note. n refers to number of respondents.
* $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .05$